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Hitchcock in spyland again

By Louise Sweeney

The problem with having read the book first, when it's a thriller like "Topaz," is that you're never sure just how tingling the film is. Even in the hands of a master like Alfred Hitchcock, much of the action is still-second sight.

Leon Uris's novel about a Communist espionage ring called "Topaz," operating from the heights of the French Government in the early '60's, was a gripper from beginning to end. The Hitchcock film based on it gets off to a clattering good start—the whirlwind defection of a top Russian official and his family to the United States during a visit to Denmark. Black Mercedes getaway car, waiting plane, touchdown in Washington, it all zips along with the offbeat suspense typical of Hitchcock. "Very clumsy operation—it wasn't the way we would have done it," says the Russian, delightfully and dourly played by Per-Axel Arosenius.

Hitchcock's "Topaz" doesn't stay with the Russian family as the novel does in its fascinating study of their Americanization, and it differs along other plot lines. But Samuel Taylor's screenplay has kept the Cuban-missile-crisis subplot. The ending is a particular disappointment after the book. It just drops off, as though Hitchcock had gotten bored with it. Himself appears almost subliminally, as he usually does in his films. Watch the airport scene.

For his cast Hitchcock has chosen many relatively unfamiliar faces to American audiences — a trick which adds to the film's credibility. Frederick Stafford, a European star, plays the pivotal role of French career diplomat André Devereaux, wiz zee off-again-on-again accent and a great deal of polish. But not much emotion: In one tragic plane scene he might be deciding on chicken or steak for dinner.

Dany Robin is his unhappy, lacquered wife, Karin Dor his fiery Cuban underground mistress. Michel Piccoli is suave and sinister as a top French official. The best known face in the group is that of John Forsythe, who competently plays American Embassy career officer Michael Nordstrom. In a minor role, Roscoe Lee Browne as a free-lance Harlem spy is cool, wily, and delightful.

There are some nice Hitchcock touches—like having the Russians in the get-away scene duck bullets that are never fired, playing on the fear of unseen danger that is one of his favorite devices for heightening suspense. But there are no really memorable Hitchcock moments in this film, equal to the tennis scene in "Strangers on a Train" in which only the murderer is not following the volley. Some viewers will be relieved that there are none of the moments of sheer terror which marked the shower scene in "Psycho" or the rush of attacking wings in "The Birds."

It's a good Hitchcock but not a great Hitchcock. And those who go to see his films for their breathless roller-coaster rides into mystery will be disappointed.

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